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ABSTRACT

This discussion of educational reform and school improvement is divided into three areas. Barriers to reform are considered in the first section, with a particular focus on the role of teacher unions in blocking many proposed reforms, e.g., career ladders, and the intrusion of politics into educational reform movements. It is pointed out that the manner in which schools are organized and administered has also created barriers to educational reform. The involvement of legislatures and state boards of education in assuming greater control through statutes and regulations takes away local autonomy and further disenfranchises teachers. In the second section, the empowerment of teachers is seen as a promising solution to barriers facing reform efforts. Sound teacher empowerment can be the vehicle which restores confidence in the schools and reduces teacher isolation, increases autonomy and accountability, and encourages collegiality among teachers as professionals. Section three lists several guidelines for increasing the empowerment of teachers. (JD)

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"Will Empowerment of Teachers Remove Barriers to Educational Reform?"

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A paper presented to the National Council of States on Inservice Education

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Will Empowerment of Teachers Remove Barriers

To Educational Reform?

I had the privilege to serve as Commissioner of Education for Governor Lamar Alexander from 1981 to 1987. We developed and implemented the Tennessee Better Schools Program during that six year period. It was one of the most comprehensive reform programs introduced in the United States and even proceeded the Nation at Risk report.

The Better Schools Program was a ten point plan to improve our schools and included a renewal of the importance of teaching and learning basic skills, introduced students to computer literacy, redefined vocational education, established summer institutions for our gifted students, organized programs for disruptive youngsters, provided more math and science teachers, provided for Centers of Excellence at our Universities, and established the Master Teacher Program, which was later renamed The Career Ladder Program.

The Master Teacher Program, the cornerstone of the Better Schools Program provided an incentive pay plan for qualifying teachers ranging from $1,000 to $7,000. The plan was developed to assist the state in recruiting, retaining, and rewarding outstanding teachers.

How was the Better Schools Program accepted? Public acceptance by citizens was tremendous. Early polls indicated that citizens were willing to pay more taxes if quality education issues were addressed. They were not willing to pay additional taxes for "more of the same", a phrase coined by Governor Alexander during the debate.

Educators were positive about the educational reform proposals with the exception of the Master Teacher Program. Led by their union leaders the Tennessee Education Association was successful in delaying the passage of the reform bill in 1983, but after 46,000 citizens formed the organization called "Tennesseans for Better Schools" and lobbied for passage of the act, the legislature passed the bill the following year by a two to one margin. The general assembly also funded the program by approving an additional one cent sales tax. The program provided more than 350 million additional dollars annually to our schools and remains in effect today, but the battle was not easy and left its scars.

The majority of the fifty states have addressed educational reform during the 80'as and at least twenty six states have introduced Career Ladder Programs with mixed degrees of success. Will reform be successful? Will our schools improve? Will the public school system survive? Why hasn't the national reform movement been more successful? What will it take to bring teacher unions on board? How can the barriers to reform be removed?

My presentation is based on personal experiences and research since leaving the commissioner's office. The presentation is divided into three areas: I. Barriers to Reform; II. Empowerment of Teachers as a Promising Solution; and III. Suggested guidelines for Increasing Empowerment.

I. Major Barriers to Educational Reform

The educational reform movement begun in the 80's has generated genuine interest in improving our schools, and our citizens have expressed a willingness to pay the cost for needed change. But, the reform movement may be doomed for failure if the political, institutional, and organizational barriers are not removed.

Political Barriers

Following the introduction of the Better Schools Program in Tennessee, state polls indicated that citizens of Tennessee, by a large majority, considered the program as an excellent plan for the improvement of our schools. Also, more and more of our citizens began to understand the relationship of good schools to economic growth and to improving the quality of life for Tennesseans. Our state agenda received much attention on the national level.

Political leaders from other states, including governors and legislators, flocked to our state to receive briefings about our program. It is now evident that some of those leaders who visited, copied our legislation, and introduced it back home, had a more personal stake in the appearance of reform than in its actual existence. Those leaders used the movement for reelection or as a stepping stone to a higher political office. Their actions have given creditability to critics who believe that politics should not be involved with education.

Teacher Unions

Lieberman (1987) identified teacher unions and teacher collective bargaining statutes, tenure laws and the governance structure of public education as major barriers to reform.

The mission and goals of teacher unions will not permit their leaders to assist in removing those barriers which stand in the way to reform. The majority of union leaders cannot accept the principle that their members should be paid on the basis of performance, nor can they accept the fact that achievement gained by students should be used as a major criterion for

evaluation of effective teaching. Teacher unions must advocate indexed salary schedules and across the board pay increases for all of its members; otherwise, there would be little justification for their existence.

Lieberman (1987) stated "Teacher unions were organized and exist to maximize teacher benefits, not to represent pupils nor interest of citizens". Teacher Unions, like many in the industrialized sector, must join in partnership with the school and community if our public schools are to produce the results expected by our nation.

Governance Structure

The manner in which schools are organized and administered has also created barriers to educational reform. With each passing year, legislatures and state boards of education assume greater control through statutes and regulations in attempt to improve our schools. But these actions take away local autonomy and further disenfranchise teachers. At the local level, boards of education and administrators may have approved bargaining agreements which severely limit their activities to achieve results expected by our citizens. Administrators and board members spend an inordinate amount of time on budgeting matters, busing of students, receiving and hearing complaints, and screening and employing staff. Too little time is spent on the assessment of results achieved by the system, simply because other items receive a higher priority.

The early reform reports of the 80's did not address these barriers. The reports ignored the existence of the role of the unions, the bargaining laws, the weaknesses of the organizational structures of our schools and the practices and behaviors of our administrators.

II. Empowerment of Teachers: A Promising Solution

Our last major barrier to reform deals with the lack of teacher empowerment. Macroff (1988) warns that reform proposals that ignore the central role of teachers are doomed for failure. "Empowerment means working in an environment in which a teacher acts as a professional and is treated as a professional". Schools administrators and boards should feel comfortable with that definition and move quickly to develop action plans which will remove the barriers to empowerment.

Will the unions accept that definition and make it crystal clear to the public that the term does not imply that teachers should take over the controls and operations of our schools? Can a partnership be formed by school boards, school administrators and teachers which will enable all educators to be treated as professionals and to behave as professionals? I repeat again, empowerment of teachers must not be promoted by unions as a subtle way of gaining control of our schools. Our schools belong to our public and our citizens must maintain the right to define what is expected of our schools. Boards of education and school administrators would be wise to spend more time listening to teachers as they define barriers to achieving the goals of the system. Armed with this information, boards of education and administrators can revise policies and practices which will remove those barriers to empowerment.

What are those barriers to empowerment? Teachers report that isolation, lack of autonomy, lack of accountability, and the need for more positive collegial relationships are the major barriers to job satisfaction. Some teachers have left public schools and have turned to private practices in an

effort to achieve self-fulfillment.

Olson (1987) conducted a study of private practices taking place in Minnesota. She found two major reasons why teachers are drawn to private practices:

(1) Teachers who enter private practice do so for a compelling need for professional autonomy and accountability.

Teachers who were engaged in private practice reported that they had become frustrated because teaching had become a job rather than a profession. Instructional decisions had been made by time consuming committees and administrative processes, and they were angry with a system that accepted everyone's work regardless of its quality.

Teachers who were engaged in private practice reported that more autonomy was given teachers for decision making, and autonomy increased as they became more accountable for results achieved.

(2) Teachers who entered private practice developed more positive collegial relationships.

Teachers listed sharing professional responsibilities as another major benefit of group practices. They planned together and learned together. They developed pride and responsibility to the group. They utilized the strengths of each member. They realized that if one failed they all failed. This spirit of collegiality is difficult to achieve under the present structure of public schools, but effective administrators and creative boards find solutions for this problem.

Isolation of teachers within school buildings has always presented problems for our teachers. Carl Glickman (1985) noted that the teacher's work environment is marked by incessant psychological encounters:

> Each day the teacher meets with 25 to 30 students for six and one-half hours.... All this human interaction takes place in a nine hundred-square-foot classroom, where a teacher must instruct, manage, discipline, reinforce, socialize, and attend to multiple student occurrences....
>
> Teachers shoulder those psychological demands and dilemmas alone. The isolation prohibits teachers from from sharing and learning from others.... The one room school is still with us today. They do not talk to each other about professional matters; and they seldom see what others are doing. This lack of professional contact has been documented by a study of the modal duration of professional discussions between teachers during a school day and DeSances and Blumberg (1979) found the duration was less than two minutes.

Less isolation occurs when boards of education plan facilities which provide spaces for team planning and when effective leaders provide adequate time for the department staff or grade level team to share in development of instructional responsibilities. Such practices increase the teacher's knowledge of subject matter and teaching practices.

The examples listed are only a small number of illustrations of methods used to empower teachers. It appears that a pamphlet entitled "What Works in Empowerment" should be development for boards of education and school leaders. The publication may inspire the governance structure of the state and the local school to question its policies and practices which are presently based on an obsolete and paternalistic philosophy.

Those responsible for the governance and operation of schools would profit also from the study of school effectiveness. Effective schools have effective leaders and effective teachers. Stated another way, effective teachers are leaders in their schools and communities and an effective principal is a leader of leaders. Effective leaders empower teachers and empowered teachers are effective teachers. "Empowerment means working in an environment in which

a teacher acts as a professional and is treated as a professional". Our students will be the benefactors of results produced by a true profession.

III. Guidelines for Increasing Empowerment of Teachers

1) The governance structure - the governor, legislature, state and local board should accept Macroff's definition of teacher empowerment. Statutes and policies which restrict empowerment programs needed to be rescinded or revised.

2) Professional employees of school systems, their associations and unions, should accept Macroff's definition.

3) State and local governments need to budget for staff development programs which increase the knowledge and skills of teachers and administrators.

4) School boards must select staff, especially principals, who possess leadership and management skills as defined in research on effective schools and effective principals. Principals who possess these skills utilize the staff in cooperative planning, decision making, and evaluation.

5) A national clearinghouse on empowerment should be established and sponsored by NGA, AASA, NASSP, NAEP, NEA, AFT, and NSBA which will provide information, examples, pitfalls, and guidelines for empowerment.

6) Teacher and administration preparation programs should include studies on empowerment.

7) Isolation of teachers can be reduced by improved scheduling of teachers for better utilization of their talents. This practice will also provide greater recognition of the teachers' contributions to the school program.

8) More states and local boards need to provide career ladder programs which recognize great teachers.

9) Citizens need to select board members who understand the importance of setting goals, evaluating results, and removing barriers to empowerment.

10) Educators must capitalize on the current interest of the public to improve our schools, an opportunity which comes about every twenty years.

Summary

The current educational reform movement is unprecedented because of its duration of time. The movement which began in the early 80's is now considered to be in its second wave with more emphasis on improved leadership and greater honor of teachers. Considering that sincere interest in educational reform occurs only each twenty years, we, who are the teachers and administrators, must take advantage of the moment by working in concert to resolve problems of image, be willing to address the accountability expected, and constantly remind ourselves that the schools do belong to the public.

Teacher empowerment, when defined properly, can be the vehicle which restores the confidence in our schools. Sound teacher empowerment programs can reduce isolation, increase autonomy, accountability, and knowledge, and when achieved will truly make education a profession.

"We will we be working in an environment in which educators act as a professional because we will be treated as a professional".

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